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Region's transit plan unveiled

Higher gas tax among funding sources

By Karen Rubin

Staff Writer

Thursday, April 01, 2004 - Gas taxes, toll roads and private sector financing are proposed to help raise \$213 billion for freeway and transit projects slated to be built over the next 30 years.

The projects are outlined in the 2004 Regional Transportation Plan that officials with the Southern California Association of Governments unveiled Thursday in downtown Los Angeles.

The plan -- approved by SCAG's Regional Council by a 50-2 vote -- covers Los Angeles, San Bernardino, Orange, Riverside, Ventura and Imperial counties.

"This is a comprehensive effort to address the Southern California transit system in its entirety," said Jeff Lustgarten, a SCAG spokesman. "It's an attempt to look at a way to achieve a better performance out of our transportation network."

In May, it will be sent to Washington, D.C., for review by the federal Environment Protection Agency and the Department of Transportation. The agencies then determine how to provide federal funding. The Federal Highway Administration and the Federal Transit Administration are expected to vote on the plan by June 8, said SCAG spokesman Forrest Beanum .

SCAG's final draft proposes to raise funds for the projects by:

- Increasing the region's gasoline tax by 10 cents a gallon, which would raise \$31 billion;
- Tapping the private sector and using tolls on dedicated truck ways to bring in \$62 billion;
- Use \$120 billion in local, state and federal funds.

The report grapples with how to deal with an anticipated increase of 6 million people throughout the region over the next 26 years.

Funding opportunities have changed drastically since the 1960s when federal government provided more than half of the transportation money for the region, SCAG officials said. Now, only 20 percent of the funding comes from federal dollars.

With Sacramento pulling \$4.5 billion in transportation funding, the report puts a new emphasis on the public paying for transportation by way of tolls and gas taxes.

But some disagree with tapping the public.

"It's hard to go to motorists and ask them for more, when what they are paying now is not being used the way it should be," said Stephen Finnegan of the Automobile Club of Southern California. "Tolls should not be proposed on existing lanes that do not have tolls now."

Some of the projects highlighted include:

- Building over crossing and underpasses so street traffic does not have to stop every time a train passes by;
- Building elevated truck-only lanes for the Long Beach (710), Pomona (60) freeways and Ontario (15) freeways to accommodate traffic;
- The Long Beach Freeway extension would include toll projects to South Pasadena;
- A new freeway connecting Orange and Riverside counties;
- Toll lanes for Ventura (101) Freeway could be underground or elevated.

Still, others who reviewed this plan say what really matters to the public is what is happening in the next three years, not 30 years from now.

"It's like punching a bag of Jello," said Dana Gabbard, a member of the Southern California Transit Advocates, a group that lobbies for public transportation rights.

"It's a dog-and-pony show. In three years they will draft a new plan."

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